



(U) NSA Linguists 'Panning for Gold'

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(TS//SI) To really appreciate what a linguist does on a daily basis, consider these scenarios:

- a translation says that "A *bomb* is about to explode and lives may be at stake!"; or
- we see the first-ever reflection of a previously unknown militia; or
- a location appearing in traffic isn't on a map.

In all of these situations, linguistic skills were key to identifying what was really going on.

(TS//SI) The "bomb" turned out to be a water "pump"; the "newly discovered militia" that caused such a stir had been disbanded decades before, after achieving its country's independence; and the "unknown location" was a curse word and not a place-name.

(S//SI) As the previous examples demonstrate, it is critical that intercept undergo expert language analysis prior to being reported. Several steps are part of this process, each suited to linguists of certain skill levels. Initially, incoming intercept is "scanned" by linguists searching for reportable or for database information on new or existing targets. When information of interest is detected, reporters are alerted immediately and the full text, a gist, or a translation of the item in question may be generated.

(C) Next, the text's accuracy is checked by a senior linguist with keen knowledge of the target's language and slang, of its culture, and of any events affecting the situation. Only after this "quality control" process is done is the "polished" intercept passed on to the reporters. They then run it through a similar process of writing, checking and verification, not only with senior reporters, but also with the linguists who worked with the original items. With skilled and dedicated linguists present, such seemingly toilsome process can be completed within a relatively short time, if necessary.

(C) On a typical day, an NSA linguist will "scan" anywhere from dozens to hundreds of items of intercept searching for information to pass on. Most of the time the intercept is unproductive; nevertheless linguists keep "panning for gold" until they find it in the form of actionable intelligence information. Then the true value of a linguist becomes evident. To paraphrase one of our colleagues who began his [article in this series](#) by stating that "Life as we know it will end if...", well, life as we know it will not end without linguists at NSA, but timely and accurate reporting most definitely will.



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